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SUBJECT: REACTION TO THE PRESIDENT'S SPEECH FROM RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND FULL TEXT OF THE STATEMENT ISLAMIC RESEARCH COUNCIL

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Reaction from the religious leadership in Egypt to the President's June 4 speech has been positive and reflects

comments from various sectors of Egyptian society regarding their wish to see tangible outcomes. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) The Islamic Research Council (IRC) of the Al-Azhar Mosque issued a statement praising the speech (Egyptian State Information Service translation of the full text follows in para 4) and calling for "tangible deeds." Members of the IRC echoed that statement in the Egyptian media. On the local El-Beit Betak television talk show, Egyptian Grand Mufti Sheikh Ali Gomaa repeated that the speech hailed a "new era" in relations with the west based on the same "principles of respect and partnership." He called on President Obama to continue to work to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other conflicts in the region. The Egyptian English daily, The Daily News, reported that President of Al-Azhar University, Ahmed Al-Tayeb, described the speech as "building a bridge of positive dialogue between different civilizations and cultures that will benefit all humans and spread the concepts of peace, justice and mutual respect."

¶3. (U) Background: The IRC was established in 1961 with the purpose of being the "supreme arbitrator of Islamic legal and cultural discourse" and speaks in the name of Al-Azhar. It is made up of 50 senior Muslim scholars from various Muslim countries and is headed by the Grand Imam of Al Azhar Sheikh Mohammad Syed Tantawi. Other notable member Scholars include: Dr Mahmoud Hamdi Zagzag, the Egyptian Minister of Endowment and Islamic affairs; Sheikh Ali Gomaa, the Grand Mufti of Egypt; and Dr Ahmad El Tayyib, the Rector of Al Azhar University.

¶4. (U) Begin Text:

Statement by the Islamic Research Council (IRC) of Al-Azhar Mosque on the Occasion of Obama's Speech to Muslim World.
On the occasion of President Barack Obama's historic visit to Egypt and his speech to the Muslim World which he gave at Cairo University, the Members of the Islamic Research Council (IRC) welcome President Obama's visit as a clear gesture of goodwill and respect. This gesture is particularly welcome given the fact that President Obama chose Egypt as the venue of his speech to the Muslim World in recognition for its rich legacy and profound influence on the Islamic World by virtue of its being the seat of the most respected and influential Sunni institution of Islamic scholarship and education in the world; Al Azhar.

The Members of the IRC view President Obama's speech as indicative of a promising new era in relations between America and the Arab and the Muslim worlds, and that paves the way for real dialogue among civilizations, rather than conflict, which some may want us to believe is unavoidable.

The Members commend President Obama for his deep appreciation for the Islamic faith and the contributions of Islamic civilization over the centuries in shaping the world for the better, and for his assertion that America seeks greater engagement and a true partnership with the Muslim world based upon mutual respect.

The Members wish to assert that they share with President Obama the goal of a just, comprehensive, and lasting peace in the Middle East, particularly between Palestine and Israel, and strongly call upon him to make progress towards achieving such a peace in the region. They also welcome his initiative to end the occupation of Iraq and withdraw US forces. The Members stress that a similar initiative should be made in Afghanistan.

The Members assure the American people that the concerns of most Muslims are identical to those of most Americans, and that they have a common desire to lead a peaceful and dignified life. They both face a common threat posed by extremism and terrorism, which people of all religions reject.

On their part, the Members of the IRC affirm that throughout its long history, Al-Azhar has provided equal educational opportunities for men and women, and has been devoted to spreading a balanced vision of Islam based on the various recognized schools of Islamic law and orthodox theology infused with spiritual depth.

Students at Al-Azhar are, and have been taught not only how to master grammar, logic, and law, but they have also been given instruction in Islamic ethics and spirituality as well, which are considered integral parts of effective religious leadership, and the development of a culture of dialogue and tolerance. Combined with an understanding of contemporary issues, this holistic approach to religious education continues to draw students from all over the world to study at Al-Azhar. These students return to their countries with not only knowledge, but also the example of a balanced religiosity that, while remaining true to its principles, is able to address the needs of Muslim society in a changing world.

Al-Azhar has long been active in reaching out to other religious communities, both within the Islamic world, and at the international level. This spirit of dialogue can be found in the statements and fatwas of Al-Azhar's Sheikhs, as well as in the activities of its scholars.

The Members of the IRC affirm that there is a great and vast field in which both the Muslim world and the United States can act together, including rejecting terror, defending and promoting the moral values of compassion and justice, spreading goodwill and bridging misunderstandings, and overcoming misconceptions and stereotypes among all peoples of the world.

The Members recognize the necessity of translating these shared commitments into tangible deeds and programs to achieve these noble goals.

H.E. Dr. Mohamed El-Sayed El-Tantawy
Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar
President of the Islamic Research Council

End Text.